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AN
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WHO WAS THE MOTHER OF FRANKLIN'S SON?

AN

HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM,

HITHERTO GIVEN UP—NOW PARTLY ANSWERED

BY

PAUL LEICESTER FORD.

"Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate
Nor set down aught in malice."

BROOKLYN, N. Y.
1889.

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ONE of the greatest penalties of fame is the attendant publicity it gives to all the actions and utterances of its winners. Everything said or done is sooner or later subject to microscopic study, and as this scrutiny is directed against men, not gods, it is but too evident that time, that silent but all powerful judge, will develop and investigate flaws and errors in even our greatest and best.

The interests of truth and history require a recognition and due weighing of these missteps, but with a certain *cult* they are dealt with in a way that to most readers and students savors too strongly of the popular idea of scandal-mongery. Attention is called to these failings, they are repeated and put in print. Undue prominence is given to the smallest incidents, and the whole too often smacks of ill-concealed pleasure. It seems as if mankind no sooner recognized the unusual worth of the individual than certain of the mass en-

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deavored at once to reduce him to his former position by calling attention to what in the ordinary man would probably have passed unnoticed, and which, while of a certain value in properly estimating the individual, has practically no importance in history.

There are few great men who more thoroughly took the public into their confidence than did Benjamin Franklin. In his Autobiography he sets down much that a partisan would wish unsaid, and especially is this true where he writes of his relations with women. The Franklin that he describes in his courtships of the two Philadelphian girls, or in his "foolish intrigues with low women," is not pleasant or improving reading unless Franklin's motives be thoroughly understood, and we can see the old, calm, affectionate philosopher, who once planned "a little work for the benefit of youth, to be called the *Art of Virtue*," deliberately cataloguing the "errata" of his life, "nothing extenuating," that humanity might profit by his faults and mistakes.

But his Autobiography is not the only way in which Franklin laid bare what in others would have remained untold. By his taking his illegitimate

son

son William to his home, and rearing him in every sense as a true son, he made his greatest fault the subject of public knowledge and comment. *

Imitating their contemporaries, now known as the "eulogistic school," the early biographers of Franklin passed over this fact without mention.† His grandson, son of this William, for obvious reasons could hardly treat of the matter, and in this he was followed by Weems, Woods, Duane and Weld, while Jared Sparks, the most historically earnest of the early writers, was by personal reasons debarred from saying aught of this affair.‡

This entire suppression of the facts has, however,

* It is presumable that Franklin's silence in his Autobiography concerning this greatest erratum was due to that work having been written to this very son.

† The one exception to this I have found is given in a brief sketch of Franklin, purporting to have been written in 1776, printed in the London *Morning Post* of Tuesday, June 1st, 1779, where the author, who from a subsequent duel occasioned by one of these articles proved to be the Rev. Bennet Allen, says of him "he ingratiated himself with the ministry so far that they . . . made his natural son Governor of the Jerseys, which he still holds, and is a prisoner in Connecticut. He had this son by an oyster wench in Philadelphia, whom he left to die in the streets of disease and hunger."

‡ The biographers of William Franklin have paid but little attention to his birth. The sketch in *Public Characters of 1801-2*, which is evidently inspired by Governor Franklin, makes no mention of his birth being illegitimate. Whitehead and Elmer both merely mention the fact.

resulted

resulted in producing a reaction in his more recent biographers. Not content with producing and calling attention to this misstep, we have it served up with accessories and side-lights which, however interesting and picturesque, are children of the writers' brains, and quite as illegitimate as Franklin's son.

Mr. Theodore Parker was the first of these "critical historians," and in his *Historic Americans* (p. 52), he writes of Franklin: "In his private morals there were doubtless great defects, and especially in his early life much that was wrong and low. His temperament inclined him to vices of passion. He fell the way he leaned, and caught an abiding stain from his intrigues with low women . . . At the age of twenty-four he sought to negotiate a matrimonial engagement with a very deserving young woman. He demanded with her a portion of one hundred pounds, and required her father to mortgage his house to raise the money. The bargain was broken off, though the woman in question soon became the mother of his only son."

These statements were a little too glaring to pass unnoticed, and Edmund Quincy in a review of the work

work in *The Nation* of February 2, 1871 (vol. XII, p. 77), wrote as follows: "Mr. Parker was not a man to call a spade anything but a spade. He is perfectly plain-spoken as to the immoralities of all his famous subjects in regard to women . . . Franklin's own narrative certainly absolves all commentators from any squeamishess as to him. The colors in which he draws himself are dark enough, but Mr. Parker gives the picture a yet darker hue. The figure which Franklin cuts in his own account of his breaking off his engagement with Miss Godfrey because her father could not give her enough money to pay off his debt to the printing house, is mean and paltry enough, but far from being so ineffably base as Mr. Parker represents it. He says, after relating the above facts 'the bargain was broken off, though the woman in question soon became the mother of his only son?' If Mr. Parker were alive and could prove this assertion, he would solve the one mystery about Franklin's life, to wit: who was the mother of William Franklin? It has baffled the curiosity of all other enquirers. Mr. Sparks assured us that he had looked it up in vain. The late eminent and lamented Alexander Dallas Bache, Franklin's grandson,

son, also told us that he had failed to ascertain this fact, and considered it as past finding out at this day. A venerable lady, who died not much more than twenty years ago, who was married and living in Philadelphia when Franklin returned thither in 1785, who knew him well and was part of the society in which he moved, and who naturally heard all the gossip of the society about him (and there was plenty of it), assured us that she had never heard who the woman in question was, and did not believe that anybody knew it. It was probably one of the 'low women' with whom he tells us that he had intrigued in those days, and who died in obscurity and was forgotten before anybody took any interest in the question. We cannot believe, if there were any foundation for Mr. Parker's statement, that it could have escaped the research of Mr. Sparks and Mr. Bache and fifty other enquirers, and are obliged to conclude that he had no sufficient authority for loading the memory of Franklin with this enormous aggravation of his despicable conduct, and still less for blackening the good name of poor Miss Godfrey* after she had been for a century in her grave."

* Mr. Quincy had no authority for giving her the name of Godfrey. We merely know that she was a relation of the Godfreys.

Mr.

Mr. James Parton next essayed treatment of this matter, and in his *Life of Franklin* (p. 198) he genially decides that his hero's marriage with Miss Read was "not unequal" because an "ample set-off" was the "little incumbrance somewhere in Philadelphia not many months old," but he entirely neglected to give us his authority for the birth of the child prior to Franklin's marriage.

Prof. John Bach McMaster came next, and in his *Franklin as a Man of Letters* (p. 44) he tells his readers that "it was at this time that Benjamin founded the Junto, wrote his famous epitaph, grew religious, composed a liturgy for his own use, and became the father of an illegitimate son. The name of the mother most happily is not known; but as the law against bastardy was then rigidly enforced against the woman and not against the man, she was, in all likelihood, one of that throng who received their lashes in the market-place and filled the records of the council with prayers for the remission of fines."

Mr. John T. Morse, the last biographer of Franklin, in his *Benjamin Franklin* (p. 16), closes these quotations by writing that: "An early contribution of his own to the domestic *ménage* was his illegitimate

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illegitimate son, William, born soon after his wedding, of a mother of whom no record or tradition remains. It was an unconventional wedding gift to bring home to a bride; but Mrs. Franklin, with a breadth and liberality of mind akin to her husband's, readily took the babe not only to her home, but really to her heart, and reared him as if he had been her own offspring. Mr. Parton thinks that Franklin gave this excellent wife no further cause for suspicion or jealousy."

As already said, the interest of history requires a due acknowledgment of this matter, and each biographer must decide how pertinent it is to Franklin's life, and how prominent a part to give it in his text; but if we are to write of it, let us either investigate all the sources of information or at least limit our statements to known or provable facts.

These heretofore have practically been: 1. That about 1730 a son was born to Franklin out of wedlock. 2. That this son, at an early though unknown date, was taken to his father's home. 3. That he was reared as a son not only by his father, but by his father's wife, so that in every office they were as mother and son.

To these heretofore known facts the author can now add something concerning William Franklin's mother, which will at least enable future biographers to eliminate some of the fictional statements of their predecessors. Derived from a source avowedly hostile to Franklin, it is if anything of greater value for that reason, as all the statements are presumably made as bad as they could be, so we know the worst that his townsmen could say of him.

In the year 1764 the struggle between the "old" and "new" parties in Pennsylvania reached the climax of one of the longest and bitterest political controversies this country has ever known. The question at issue was the continuing the proprietary government then existing, or the alteration of it into a crown government. At the head of the "old" party stood Benjamin Franklin — at that of the "new" naturally stood, though in England, the then proprietors, Thomas and Richard Penn.

The press was of course called into use in this contest, and in the preface to *The Speech of John Dickinson*, the Rev. William Smith, as one method of arguing the benefits of the proprietor's rule,

rule, constructed a glowing "epitaph" on their grandfather, William Penn—evidently believing, as others have done at later periods, that both individual merit and public obligation were hereditary. Franklin, however, took a different view of the case, and in the preface to the *Speech of Joseph Galloway* he caricatured this "in a lapidary way" and wrote an epitaph on the proprietors as severe and caustic as the former had been fulsome and complimentary. This in turn produced from the pen of Hugh Williamson, at that time a tutor in the Philadelphia Academy, a small pamphlet entitled: *What is Sauce for a Goose is also Sauce for a Gander. Being a small Touch in the Lapidary Way, or Tit for Tat, in your own Way. An Epitaph on a certain Great Man. Written by a departed Spirit, and now most humbly inscribed to all his dutiful Sons and Children, who may hereafter choose to distinguish him by the Name of A Patriot. Dear Children, I send you here a little Book for you to look upon That you may see your Pappy's Face When he is dead and gone. Philadelphia, Printed in Arch Street, 1764.*

In this little pamphlet, as great with party spirit and personality as adjectives and gall will allow,

allow, this matter is naturally produced. We of this generation have not been above using moral missteps as political bludgeons, and the politicians of that period were no better or fairer than at present. Accordingly the following excerpt formed part of this campaign document:

"An Epitaph &c
To the much esteem'd Memory of
B . . . . . F . . . . . Esq; L. L. D.
* * * *
Possessed of many lucrative
Offices
Procured to him by the Interest of Men
Whom he infamously treated,
And receiving enormous Sums
from the Province,
For Services
He never performed
After betraying it to Party and Contention,
He lived, as to the Appearance of Wealth
In Moderate Circumstances.
His principal Estate, seeming to consist
In his Hand Maid Barbara
A most valuable Slave,
The Foster Mother
of his last Offspring
Who did his dirty Work

And

And in two Angelic Females,
whom Barbara also served
As Kitchen Wench and Gold Finder.
But alas the Loss!
Providence for wise tho' secret Ends
Lately deprived him of the Mother
of Excellency.*
His Fortune was not however impaired
For he piously withheld from her
Manes
The pitiful Stipend of Ten pounds per Annum
On which he had cruelly suffered her
To Starve;
Then stole her to the Grave in Silence,
Without a Pall, the covering due to her dignity
Without a Tomb, or even
A Monumental Inscription."

* * * *

It is only a little light on this subject, but it is something. It certainly is better for Franklin's reputation to be able to prove that the unfortunate woman was not "one of that throng who received their lashes in the market place" and was not "left to die in the streets of disease and hunger;" but was, with her son, received into the Frank-

* William Franklin was then Governor of New Jersey, and so entitled to the term "Excellency."

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lin household, even though in a menial position, was allowed, for that day, fair wages, and finally was buried at Franklin's expense. It is nothing which can ever redound to his credit, and which every admirer of his would wish undone; but the fault once committed, he certainly made a reparation to both mother and child such as few men would have made.

Worthington Chauncey Ford
with aff. regards from
Paul Leicester Ford

WHO WAS THE MOTHER OF FRANKLIN'S SON?

AN

HISTORICAL CONUNDRUM

HITHERTO GIVEN UP—NOW PARTLY ANSWERED

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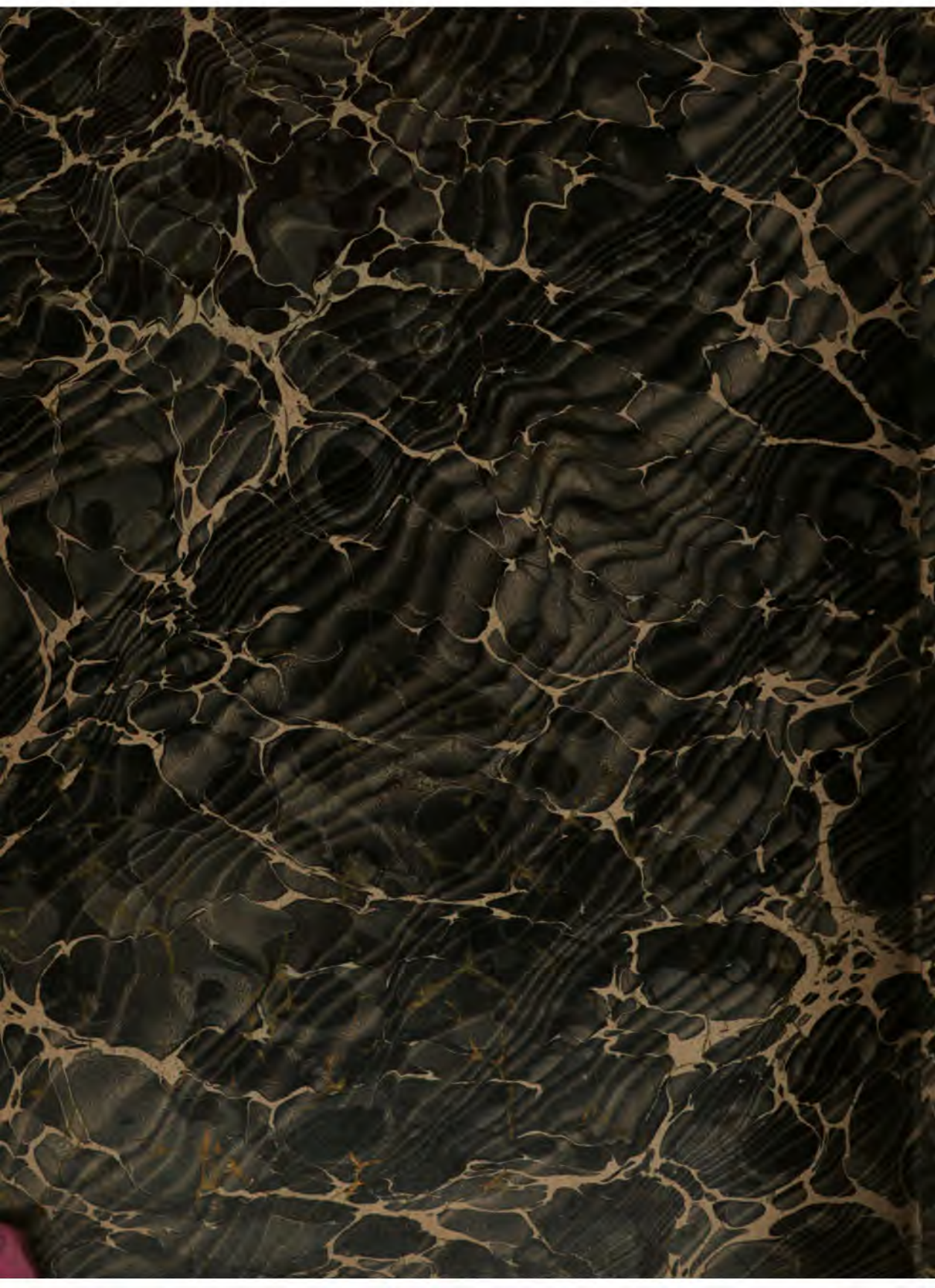
"Speak of me as I am; nothing extenuate
Nor set down aught in malice."

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